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ABSTRACT

To grasp what happened to the institutionalization of presidential debates in 1988 it will be useful to ask what is the future of party sponsorship of presidential debates. Given that sponsorship has been an issue discussed after every debate since 1960, either from a legal perspective (i.e. who can sponsor and remain in compliance with Federal Communication Commission regulations) or from the perspective of who can best produce debates, the formation of the Commission on Presidential Debates in 1987 could be viewed as an idea whose time had arrived. A comparison of the goals for the commission and the actual events that occurred during the 1988 presidential campaign indicates that the commission did not succeed fully in achieving its mission. There were debates, but not as many or on the dates and in the places scheduled. There are several reasons why the debate over the debates occurred again in 1988: a struggle between the Commission and the League of Women Voters over sponsorship; the candidates themselves; and political realities. The fact that the debates did occur moves presidential debates one step closer to being institutionalized. The commission did not achieve all of its goals, but a mechanism is now in place which can coordinate research and planning to improve future debates. (Thirty-four notes are provided and an appendix includes a listing of the commission's board of directors and advisory board members, and the criteria for determining third party candidates' debate participation. (MS)

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THE COMMISSION ON PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES:

A NEW APPROACH TO POLITICAL DEBATES OR JUST A NEW SPONSOR?

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Writing after the 1984 presidential debates, Australian journalist Stephen Mills argued that presidential debates required "rebuilding" before 1988.[1] He noted three fundamental flaws in the system:

1) The League of Women Voters has a precarious hold on the sponsorship of the debates. Debate advocates must decide whether they want League sponsorship to continue or whether they want to encourage the television networks or some other group to take over.
2) The current content of the debates does not fulfill their stated aims. Debate advocates must decide whether more specific content guidelines are desirable and, if so, what guidelines.
3) The current format of the debates creates misconceptions about the debating and electoral process and must be rectified.[2]

In addressing the first flaw, Mills wrote that "a new sponsor -- one with resources, reputation, and rule-making clout -- should be found or created immediately."[3] Mills believed that a new sponsor could make improvements "that are manifestly sensible, fair, and in the public interest. Debaters in 1988 should be presented with a fait accompli that they would find costlier to avoid than to accept."[4]

On February 18, 1987 Republican National Committee Chairman Frank J. Fahrenkopf and Democratic National Committee Chairman Paul G. Kirk, Jr. announced creation of such an entity, The Commission on Presidential Debates. In their joint press release, Fahrenkopf and Kirk asserted that party control would "institutionalize the debates, making them an integral and permanent part of the presidential process."[5]

The party chairmen announced that their parties' potential candidates "have committed to support party-sponsored debates"[6] and that once the Commission's

committed to support party-sponsored debates"[6] and that once the Commission's recommendations were prepared, they would "be forwarded to all potential candidates for concurrence."[7]

As a result of the commitment the chairmen claimed to have from the candidates, they went on to state that:

> This degree of certainty about the debates going into the general election . . . is an histroic breakthrough in institutionalizing them. It means that we won't spend most of the general election campaign debating about debates, as we have too often in the past. The American people have an expectation that debates will occur every four years; this process is designed to assure that that expectation will be realized.[8]

Something, however, happened on the way to the first presidential "forum" of 1988, and it was anything but "funny." The quadrennial wrangling over dates, sites, format, and height of podiums continued. Neither the Commission on Presidential Debates nor the League of Women Voters, who was waging its own battle to sponsor debates, appeared to have any control over the candidates' negotiations.

What happened to the institutionalization of presidential debates in 1988? By examining the history behind the Commission on Presidential Debates and the 1988 sponsorship controversy, this paper seeks an answer to that question as well as to another: "What is the future of party sponsorship of presidential debates?"

The Commission on Presidential Debates

The concept of an entity with the sole responsibility for sponsoring presidential debates is not a new one. Jim Karayn, project director for the League of Women Voters 1976 debates suggested formation of a national debate commission

> . . . chartered by Congress and composed of representatives from wide-ranging civic groups, political associations, broadcasting,

business and labor officials, other interest groups and organizations such as the League, and individuals familiar with the negotiation and production aspects of debates."[9]

Karayn wanted an "autonomous" commission "free from any political meddling, and its purse funded directly by Congress or the Federal Elections Commission."[10]

Karayn's proposal was credited as having "considerable merit" by Reagan debate consultant, Myles Martel.[11] However, Martel took exception to Karayn's proposal to give a commission full responsibility "for choosing the schedule, format, and agenda of the presidential debates."[12] Martel expressed the belief that the candidates should have some control over such matters.

Mills, as already noted, supported a new approach to sponsorship in 1988 and recommended consideration be given to the networks or to a new organization. He also examined Newton Minow's 1984 recommendation for political party involvement.[13]

Mills concern was that a new sponsor meet three criteria: ". . . resources to mount the events, reputation to win the confidence of other parties and the public, and . . . rule-making clout to improve conditions conducive to a satisfactory debate."[14] He admitted that the political parties met the three criteria.

Jamieson and Birdsell, whose book was released after the Commission on Presidential Debates was formed, examined the pros and cons of party sponsorship and supported such sponsorship.[15]

Given that sponsorship has been an issue discussed after every debate since 1960, either from a legal perspective (i.e. who can sponsor and remain in compliance with FCC regulations) or from the perspective of who can best produce debates, the formation of the Commission on Presidential Debates could be viewed as an idea whose time arrived in 1987. While the Commission may not satisfy Karayn's desire for an organization independent of politics, it does meet several of his criteria as well as those of the other experts cited. This section provides a background on how the Commission came into being, its goals, and its

activities.

Formation and Structure of the Commission

The Commission on Presidential Debates was established in February, 1987 by the chairmen of the Republican and Democratic National Committees. The Commission is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization designed to sponsor presidential and vice-presidential general election debates. As such, it is funded through private donations (see appendix). No party or government funds were used in carrying out the 1988 debates.

The Commission is composed of ten directors, an executive director, and a forty-member advisory board (see appendix for a list of members).

The Commission was formed as a result of two studies. The first was the Commission on National Elections which was formed by Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies in February 1985. The second was sponsored by the Twentieth Century Fund in 1986 at Harvard's Institute of Politics. Newton Minow and thirty participants and observers of presidential debates convened to study the future of presidential debates.

The Commission on National Elections final report in April 1986 included a recommendation for party sponsorship of future debates:

> Joint appearances by the major party nominees for the presidency should be made a permanent part of the electoral process. They are such an important factor that they should not be left to the vagaries and uncertainties of each presidential election but rather, to the extent possible, should be institutionalized.
>
> The commission believes that this institutionalization is most likely to take place if the two political parties assume direct responsibility for sponsoring the joint appearances. Although each nominee must ultimately decide whether to take part, the parties are in the strongest position to enlist their participation by attempting to secure commitments before they are nominated . . . .

The commission therefore urges the two parties to assume responsibility for sponsoring and otherwise ensuring that presidential candidate joint appearances are made a permanent and integral part of the presidential election process.[16]

As part of the report, a Memorandum of Agreement on Presidential Candidate Joint Appearnces was signed by Fahrenkopf and Kirk. It included the following statement:

It is our bipartisan view that a primary responsibility of each major political party is to educate and inform the American electorate of its fundamental philosphy and politices as well as its candidates' positions on critical issues. One of the most effective means of fulfilling that responsibility is through national televised joint appearances conducted between the presidential and vice presidential nominees of the two major political parties during general election campaigns. Therefore, to better fulfill our parties' responsibiliteis for educating and informing the American public and to strengthen the role of political parties in the electoral process, it is our conclusion that future joint appearances should be principally and jointly sponsored and conducted by the Republican and Democratic National Committees.[17]

The Twentieth Century Fund's recommendations for future sponsorship were included in its report, *For Great Debates: A New Plan for Future Presidential TV Debates* by Newton N. Minow and Clifford M. Sloan:

. . . sponsorship by the political parties offers several advantages. Although candidate participation is not absolutely assured, political parties are the mostly likely vehicle for institutionalizing debates. Because of their close relationship to the candidates, political parties can accomplish much of the debate planning well in advance of the actual campaign -- and, to a great extent, commit the candi-

dates to the planning of details.

. . . . To further this goal, the Democratic and Republican parties should jointly -- and immediately -- establish a not-for-profit, tax-exempt, bipartisan Presidential Debates Organization to plan and administer a series of presidential debates.

The parties should also set up a broadly based committee, composed of various citizens and groups to help advise on the sponsorship of the debates. Since disputes and questions will sometimes arise, the Presidential Debates Organization and its Advisory Committee should have the authority necessary to resolve such disputes.

Before the 1988 campaign, the Presidential Debates Organization should determine the date, place, and number of debates. Specifically, the organization should agree, as soon as possible, to a series of at least four debates -- three presidential and one vice-presidential -- to take place between Labor Day and the third week in October.[16]

Goals of the Commission

The mission statement of the Commission is basically two-fold. The first element concerns itself with sponsorship of debates and the second with voter education. The following statements taken from the programs for the presidential and vice-presidential debates explain the Commission's goals:

The Commission on Presidential Debates is an historic commitment by the two political parties to institutionalize the debates. Established in February, 1987, its mission is to instill a new spirit in American politics -- a spirit that reflects the caliber of the Lincoln-Douglas debates and looks forward to the still untapped possibilities for substantive political discourse.

. . . . It formalizes the debate forum,making it an integral and permanent part of the political process.

This undertaking will ensure that every four years, American citizens have the opportunity to evaluate the presidential candidates side-by-side for a significant period of time in live broadcasts.[19]

One of the most compelling contributions the Commission on Presidential Debates makes is in the area of voter education. The Commission recognizes the strong commitment of political parties to inform and educate voters on the critical choices they face every four years.

This year, the Commission on Presidential Debates prepared and distributed voter education materials to thousands of schools, libraries and news organizations across the country.[20]

Commission Activities

To meet their goals, the Commission followed many of Minow and Sloan's recommendations. The Directors were named in the February 18, 1987 news release, and Janet Brown was named Executive Director on April 9, 1987. On July 7, 1987 the Commission announced its schedule for four debates -- three presidential and one vice-presidential: Wednesday, September 14; Sunday, September 25; Tuesday, October 11; and Thursday, October 27, 1988. Site selections were made during the winter of 1988. Four sites were selected: Annapolis, Maryland; Winston-Salem, North Carolina (Wake Forest Unviersity); Omaha, Nebraska; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

During the summer of 1987 the advisory board was appointed by the co-chairmen. The Advisory Board met on October 1, 1987 to discuss procedures for selection of a panel of questioners and inclusion of third-party candidates. As a result of the meeting, a subcommittee composed of Richard Neustadt, Anne Wexler, and Senator Pete Wilson was appointed to develop a set of criteria for determining participation by third-party candidates. This was an important step because many who questioned party sponsorship did so because they believed third party can-

didates would not be given fair consideration by a party-sponsored organization.[21] Also as a 501(c)(3) organization, it was imperative that the Commission have such a plan in place.

A spring meeting was planned to discuss format; however, scheduling conflicts resulted in cancellation of the meeting. The executive director and the executive producer, Ed Fouhy, did seek the advice of several Advisory Board members during the planning stages.

Several meetings of the Directors were held between October 1, 1987 and the first debate to make decisions necessary to conduct the debates. The Directors also ruled on a request by third-party candidate Dr. Lenora B. Fulani to participate in the first debate. Based on the advice of a subcommittee that applied the criteria (see appendix), the Directors did not issue an invitation. Dr. Fulani took her case to court in North Carolina two days prior to the debate. The Commission's decision was upheld. An appeal the following day also favored the Commission's ruling.

The Commission also prepared voter education information during the Summer of 1988 and enlisted the assistance of ten national media and educational organizations to disseminate information (see appendix for a list). Through cooperative efforts with the National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian Institution, a brochure entitled, "Let Us Debate," was published.

During the fall campaign, the Commission sponsored three debates -- two presidential and one vice-presidential. The presidential debates were held September 25th at Wake Forest University and October 13th in Pauley Pavilion at UCLA. The vice-presidential debate was held in Omaha on October 5th. The difference between the actual schedule and the proposed schedule is discussed in the next section.

The Commission is an on-going organization. During the two years following a presidential election its work will center on voter education projects and research on presidential debates. The third and fourth years between elections will

be devoted primarily to planning debates with continued attention given to voter education projects. After the election, the Directors are scheduled to meet to consider recommendations for future debates and interim activities.

Commission Accomplishments: A Balance Sheet

A comparison of the goals for the Commission and the actual events that occurred during the 1988 presidential campaign indicates that the Commission did not succeed fully in achieving its mission. There were debates, but not as many or on the dates and in the places scheduled. While Michael Dukakis said that he was committed to the Commission's schedule, George Bush was not. As a result, the usual protracted negotiations took place with the result being the longest negotiated agreement between candidates in the history of the debates. The Commission was in contact with the negotiators, but had little input in terms of format and other important matters. The press conference format was in evidence again, only in a form many felt was among the weakest to date because of a lack of follow-up questions.

The Commission was able to avoid the problems of earlier debates in selecting panelists when over a hundred names were submitted to candidates before a panel was chosen. Candidates were not allowed unlimited strikes, and the executive director made the final selections on panelists. Panelists were selected far enough in advance that they were able to coordinate their questions and develop a strategy for their questioning.[22] Panelists were also given a 45-second time limit for questions to avoid the overly verbose questions that characterized past debates.

The Commission was able to secure the financial backing needed to run the debates. Production went smoothly, and the Commission received multiple compliments from those with whom they worked about the quality of the Commission's production team.[23]

The Commission began an educational program which reached thousands of students in the form of an informational brochure. More importantly, initial con-

tacts were made with news and educational groups that will be useful in expanding the voter education role.

In the end, it can be said that the Commission made significant strides toward gaining legitimacy as a sponsor of debates. It had to overcome the problems associated with any new organization in that very few who reported on or watched the debates and the pre-debate negotiations knew what the Commission was. It also had to overcome several problems unique to this campaign. As with any new enterprise that challenges a system, even a short-lived, ill-defined one such as presidential debates, change occurs in increments. Based on that reality, the Commission did achieve a considerable amount of success. The next section examines why the Commission was unable to accomplish all its aspired goals.

What Went Wrong?

Debates did take place in 1988, and voter education projects that went beyond the broadcast of the debates were begun. In that sense, the Commission achieved a major goal. However, as the post-Labor Day campaign began, there was no guarantee that debates would take place or that if they did, they would be in a form and quantity desirable to truly educate American voters. There are several reasons why the debate over the debates occurred again in 1988: a struggle between the Commission and the League over sponsorship; the candidates themselves; and political realities. Each is examined in this section.

The Struggle for Sponsorship

In their February 18, 1987 news release, the party chairmen commended the League of Women Voters for their contributions to the debate process. They said:

> We applaud the League for laying a foundation from which we can assume our own responsibilities. While the two party committees will be sponsors for all future presidential general election debates between our party nominees, we would expect and encourage the League's participation in sponsoring other debates, particularly in the presidential primary process.[24]

In his own news release issued by the Democratic National Committee, Paul Kirk went on to say, "We hope that the League will be available to advise our Commission on Presidential Debates and to share the valuable experience they have gained in providing a forum for debates since 1976."[25]

The League, however, did not want to be limited to providing a foundation or playing a role as an advisor. The League wanted to continue its role as sponsor. As a result, the League continued its own plans to hold debates and turned down a request by the party chairmen to have the national League president, Nancy Neuman, serve on the Board of Directors.

As a part of the Commission on National Elections, the League was aware of the final report recommending party participation. They did not agree, however, that the parties were the best sponsor available to achieve the goal of institutionalizing debates. While the League's experiences with the 1976, 1980 and 1984 debates were often frustrating and less than ideal in terms of format,[26] the 1988 League leadership was determined to continue hosting them.

The League staged a full-scale assault on the Commission through fundraising letters to its members in which they promised "real debates" instead of the parties' "pseudo-debates" and asked members to send attached post cards to Vice President Bush and Governor Dukakis urging them to commit to the League's debates.[27] The League was present at the nominating conventions to circulate petitions of support for their debates.

Columnists took up a defense of the League,[28] and local League members wrote letters to the editor of their local papers explaining the parties'intent to "steal the debates from the American voters."[29]

As a long-established organization that was associated with debate sponsorship, it is not surprising that the League garnered public support and caused George Bush, who was suffering from a gender gap, to think twice about ignoring their debates in favor of the parties'. Since Bush had clarified the record in February, 1988 that he was not committed to the parties' debates, this left the

question of sponsorship open for negotiation.

During the debate negotiations, the candidates' representatives agreed to participate in two presidential debates -- one hosted by the Commission and one by the League -- and one vice-presidential debate hosted by the Commission.

As the date for the League's debate -- October 13 or 14, depending on the baseball playoffs -- drew near, the League began having second thoughts about the 16-page agreement the candidates' negotiators had signed and asked the sponsors to abide by. On October 3, 1988, the League withdrew its sponsorship of the Los Angeles debate. The candidates asked the Commission to host the debate, and it accepted.

Because sponsorship was one of the items for negotiation, it was nearly impossible for either the Commission or the League to exert much control during the negotiation process. That is partially the reason why 1988 saw even more quibbling over details of the debate than in the past. While the League had not actually sat in on past negotiations and had agreed in past years to abide by the conditions laid out by the candidates,[30] the extent of the candidates' control over such details as ticket distribution, camera angles and positions appeared to be excessive to Nancy Neuman and resulted in her decision to withdraw sponsorship.

The Candidates' Impact on the Debate over the Debates

The lack of a clear sponsor to moderate the negotiations was not the only cause of the abnormally long and detailed agreement. The fact that George Bush was the Republican nominee also contributed as did the fact that the Dukakis negotiators were inexperienced in debate negotiations.

George Bush, of all the declared candidates from either party, was the only one to indicate he was not committed to the Commission's debates. Bush had a track record of avoiding debates. In 1980, Bush declined an invitation to participate in a vice-presidential debate,[31] and shortly after he became the frontrunner in the 1988 primaries, he withdrew from primary debates.

Bush also had a seasoned veteran as his negotiator, James Baker, who had ne-

gotiated for Ford and Reagan. This was his fourth experience, and he had obviously learned from past mistakes. One report of the negotations indicated that "The Dukakis campaign . . . made concessions to Bush on every crucial issue up for discussion."[32] Even on the issue of format, where Baker "said he would consider a single moderator, but added that it would probably require a shorter debate,"[33] the Dukakis campaign let go of the opportunity to break from the panelist format rather than shorten the debate. Because debates were of more importance to Dukakis, who was trailing in the polls and was not as well known as Bush, his negotiators were obviously willing to make sacrifices just to ensure that debates would take place.

Political Realities

While it is difficult to believe that individuals such as Melvin Laird, Bob Strauss (both of whom served on the Commission on National Elections), and Newton Minnow are politically naive, it was perhaps naive of them to believe that the parties had sufficient clout to control the candidates in the highly volatile arena of presidential debates. What they suggested has credibility insofar as the parties may be able to exert some control over contestants in the primary. However, when there is an incumbent or a candidate such as George Bush, who is similar to an incumbent, the clout is likely to be diminished. Overall, the strength of political parties in selecting nominees and guiding their campaigns has declined significantly in recent years.

In the face of such realities, the party chairmen were unwilling to guarantee that they could deliver the candidates on the four dates selected. At the Advisory Board meeting on October 1, 1987, they indicated that candidates had agreed to keep the dates open, but they issued no guarantees. Candidates and their campaigns are not synonomous with the party structure. The independence of candidates does pose a real limitation on what can be demanded of candidates by a party chairman.

It is also somewhat unrealistic to believe that candidates will ever let any

group dictate all of the terms of the debates. The League learned this each time it sponsored, and it was most likely Nancy Neuman's political naivete on this point that resulted in her frustation with the 1988 negotiations.

Anyone who has ever negotiated a debate for a candidate, and I have, knows that regardless of the sponsor or the importance of the office, the candidate should not be placed in a position which creates a disadvantage before he or she ever enters the studio or auditorium. Even college debate coaches exercise the right to strike individuals from judging panels in elimination rounds, and affirmative debaters exercise the right to "define" the terms of the resolution. The unwritten "rules" of debate be it interscholastic, intercollegiate, or presidential suggest that the participants have a right to call some of the shots.

With that reality in focus, the 1988 debates were bound to be less than perfect even if the first two complicating factors cited had not existed. That does not mean that there is no hope for improving format or reducing the level of predebate negotiations. As mentioned in the section on the Commission's accomplishments, some progress was made this year. The next section examines the future of presidential debates, the Commission's role as a sponsor, and the likelihood for such improvement.

Beyond 1988: The Future of Presidential Debates

It is important to remember that while presidential debates are becoming expected, they are still a relatively new, experimental phenomenon in presidential politics. In 50 campaigns, debates have occurred in only five. This section speculates on the future of sponsorship for debates and makes recommendations for how to improve future debates.

Sponsorship

With the League's withdrawal from the Los Angeles presidential debate, it is unlikely that it will have the credibility to gain sponsorship in 1992. The Commission's success in fund raising and in handling the technical aspects of sponsoring debates has put it in good stead for 1992. The fact that the Commis-

sion was able to raise $500,000 and arrange for the Los Angeles debate in nine days, spoke highly for continuation of an organization whose sole enterprise is general election debates.

The Commission has indicated it is not interested in hosting primary debates. If the League of Women Voters wants to remain involved in presidential debates, then they should consider the primaries their province and devote their talents, energies, and resources to hosting a series of debates at crucial times during the primary season.

Based on my experiences as a member of the Commission's Advisory Board, I believe that the composition of the Commission, with a full-time professional director, a highly experienced set of Directors, and an advisory board that represents a broad spectrum of thinking and expertise is capable of presenting debates that serve the function of informing the voters. As noted earlier, the Commission gained in both exposure and stature as a result of a successful first attempt, and its credibility should enable it to take additional steps toward more active participation with candidates' negotiators if the sponsorship problem is resolved.

The Commission's experiences in working with the candidates during debate preparations suggests that this is the case. According to Edward Fouhy, the executive producer of the debates, several items in the negotiated agreement were not followed once he had explained the technical problems associated with televising the debates. Additionally, Fouhy and the panelists in the first debate chose to ignore a provision requiring that the moderator identify the topic area prior to a question being asked. After receiving no complaints from the candidates' staff members, that pattern was followed in the other two debates.[34]

Format

No one seems to want panelists but the candidates. Panelists, academic observers, and the public have all voiced their dissatisfaction with the joint press conference format ever since the Kennedy-Nixon debates. So long as candidates and their negotiators perceive this as being the safest route to take, there is little

hope of seeing alternative formats in future debates.

If formats are to produce something closer to a traditional debate with a narrower range of issues developed in more depth and which allows the candidates to hold one another more accountable for answering questions either through direct cross-examination or more rebuttal opportunities, then candidates and their negotiators need to be educated. Until they realize that it is to the candidates' advantage to engage more directly in debate, they will continue on the presumably safer course where the confrontation takes place between the candidates and the press -- something the public is accustomed to and accepts -- rather than between the candidates which the public could perceive as being negative.

Research on debate formats needs to be synthesized and provided to negotiators as well as research conducted on public reactions to various types of formats. The Commission is hoping to conduct or sponsor research on the impact of debates on voters, and this is an area ripe with possibilities. The primary season, as was shown in 1988, can be an excellent field for experimentation with formats. While the large numbers of primary candidates limits options that are easily adapted to two-candidate debates, more exposure to cross-examination by candidates should be included.

Assuming that candidates are not convinced that panelists are dispensible, then formats need to allow for more follow-up opportunities than did this year's. The rebuttal period following the answer to a question in the 1988 debates at least provided an opponent with an opportunity to point out deficiencies in an answer. However, the one-minute limit on rebuttal was insufficient for both a rebuttal and an explanation of an alternative view. Future debate formats should allow for longer answers to the original question and a longer rebuttal. As an alternative to a follow-up by the panelist, a cross-examination by the opponent could be substituted. Such a format would appear this way:

Question by panelist 1 (45 sec.)

Answer by candidate A (3 min.)

Cross-examination by Candidate B (30 sec.)

Response by Candidate A (90 sec.)

Rebuttal by Candidate B (90 sec.)

Question by panelist 1 on a subject related, if not exact, to the one given Candidate A

Answer by Candidate B (3 min)

Cross-examination by Candidates A (30 sec.)

Response by Candidate B (90 sec.)

Rebuttal by Candidate A (90 sec.)

Whatever format is agreed upon in 1992, it should at least avoid the problems created by that used in 1988. Specifically, it should allow for more in-depth analysis of a single issue by having each panelist ask a question on a related issue such as "the economy" or "Central American policy" rather than jumping from one topic to another with each question.

Another alternative is to use more than one format. Each debate, assuming there is more than one presidential debate, could have a different format. If this is done, one debate could be with only a moderator. The other alternative is to switch formats midway through the debate as was done in the 1980 Reagan-Carter debate.

Another format issue is that of topics for the debate as a whole. This year both presidential debates dealt with both domestic and foreign policy issues. While the number of questions was almost evenly divided between foreign and domestic issues, this format created a great deal of repetition of topics in the second debate. It would be better to have a topic explored in depth in a single debate than to repeat similar questions two weeks apart and get nearly identical answers to what were given in the first debate.

Where format is concerned, it is unrealistic to expect that the perfect format will ever be devised to please the candidates, voters, and observers. There is, however, much that can be done to make the debates better than those of 1988.

By having input from the sponsor prior to and during the negotiations, it is likely that will occur.

Conclusion

The presidential debates of 1988 will not be remembered as "great." However, the fact that they did occur moves presidential debates one step closer to being institutionalized. While the step cannot be directly attributed to the creation of The Commission on Presidential Debates, its role in the 1988 debates was an important beginning point for establishing some type of continuity in the process. The Commission did not achieve all of its goals, but a mechanism is now in place which can coordinate research and planning to improve future debates.

Applying Mills 1984 analysis of the three major flaws in the debates, it can be noted that the sponsorship problem is all but resolved with the Commission's successful sponsorship of all three debates in 1988 and the League's decision to withdraw sponsorship. The problem of content has not been resolved, but that will not occur until there is agreement among those who participate, vote, observe, broadcast, and report as to what their purpose is. The third flaw related to formats is still with us. However, this flaw has potential to be resolved to some degree if the Commission utilizes its experiences from 1988 and takes advantage of its interim activities to conduct or sponsor research and to educate the candidates about the findings.

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Appendix

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BITERIA FOR DETERMINING THIRD PARTY CANDIDATES' PARTICIPATION

The criteria for judging when to include minor party candidates include, but are not necessarily limited to the following:

1. Evidence of national organization
   - A. Being listed on the ballot in enough states to have a mathematical chance of obtaining an electoral college majority.
   - B. Being organized in a majority of congressional districts in those states.
   - C. Declaring a third party candidacy before the major party conventions party primaries or state conventions, and becoming eligible for matching funds from the Federal Election Commission.
   - D. Declaring an independent candidacy after a major party convention, by splitting off from the party and securing a share of national delegates, pledges of financial support, eligibility for Federal funding, and endorsements by Federal and state officeholders.
2. Signs of national newsworthiness and competitiveness
   - A. The professional opinions of Washington bureau chiefs of major newspapers, news magazines, and broadcast networks.
   - B. The opinions of a comparable group of professional campaign managers and pollsters not currently employed by the two major candidates.
   - C. The opinions of representative political scientists specializing in electoral politics at major universities and research centers around the country.
   - D. Column inches on newspaper front pages and seconds on network telecasts in comparison with the major party candidates.
   - E. Published views of David Border of the Washington Post, William Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute, and other comparable commentators.

3. Signs of national public enthusiasm or concern.

   A. The findings of Gallup and other opinion polls conducted by national news organizations (depending on the relevance of questions asked).

   B. Reported attendance at meetings and rallies across the country (locations as well as numbers) in comparison with the two major candidates.